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## MITHRAIC ICONOGRAPHY IN HISPANIA

### REINTERPRETATION OF THE CATALOGUE AND NEW FINDINGS

**Summary:** This proposal aims to provide an update of the catalogues of findings associated with the mysteries of Mithras in Hispania produced by García y Bellido (1967) and Alvar Ezquerro (1981). A new approach to the archaeological material is needed due to the multiplicity of findings in recent decades and the overcoming of traditional theories in this field of study. We have focused on the figurative monuments, as Mithraic iconography has been considered a mere vehicle for the transmission of the eschatology of the cult.

Although three representations of tauroctony were located in the province of Baetica, the findings of Tróia and Mérida, both in Lusitania, are the most important source of materials in the territory of Hispania. Recent discoveries in Lugo, Altafulla, Cabrera de Mar, Puente Genil, San Juan de la Isla, Barbate, Mérida, along with the revision of the Museo Nacional de Arte Romano collection, have been a great contribution to the study of Mithraism in the Iberian Peninsula.

**Key words:** Mithraism, Hispania, iconography, new findings, planetary gods

#### 1. INTRODUCTION:

##### AN APPROACH TO THE STUDIES ON MITHRAISM IN HISPANIA

The publication of Antonio García y Bellido in 1967 marked a milestone in the Studies of Mithraism in Hispania.<sup>1</sup> In *Les religions orientales dans l'Espagne Romaine* (ROER) the author explored the diffusion of Mithraic beliefs in different parts of the Iberian Peninsula, amid other divinities of Phoenician and Greco-Oriental origin. García y Bellido produced a catalogue of inscriptions and artistic manifestations of these cults based on a series of publications that had previously echoed the archaeological findings in Spain and Portugal. Among them, we would like to highlight the article by the same author dedicated to the study of sculpture in Hispania and the Mithraic cult

<sup>1</sup> GARCIA Y BELLIDO, A.: *Les religions orientales dans l'Espagne Romaine*. Leiden 1967, 21–41.

in the province.<sup>2</sup> Hispania drew attention of international scholars at the beginning of the 20th century when the works to build up a bullfighting arena in Mérida unveiled a group of marbles dedicated to Mithras, along with a series of inscriptions.<sup>3</sup> Before this turning point, Franz Cumont himself had described Spain as “the poorest country in Mithraic testimonies of the whole West”,<sup>4</sup> a phrase that had stigmatised subsequent local historiography. García y Bellido, following Cumont’s path, pointed to the paucity of Mithraic testimonies compared to other “Eastern” cults, referred to Mithras as a “mazdeist” divinity and stated that the cult was associated with the army.<sup>5</sup> The author explained that, due to the peace existing in Hispania during the 2nd and 3rd century AD, it was not necessary to mobilise the troops and hence the lack of Mithraic testimonies in these territories. García y Bellido claimed that the cult entered Hispania when native soldiers returned home or when they were licensed in this territory. Despite the number of Mithraic monuments the author collected in his work, he stated that “waiting for great finds in the future is not worthy”, as they would not change his opinion on the matter.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of his work resides in the systematisation of the information available at the time, based on models proposed by previous researchers,<sup>7</sup> such as Leite de Vasconcelos, Paris, Toutain and Lantier.<sup>8</sup> García y Bellido included as Mithraic the figurative monuments of Mercury (2); Dadophor (3); Oceanus (4), Lionhead god (8); Aion (9) and Male figure with lion (11), all recovered in Mérida, along with the altar from Tróia, Portugal (20). From the Baetica province he selected the unfinished tauroctony from Italica (28) and the same motif from Igabrum (30).

The Mithraic figurative repertoire produced by García y Bellido omitted a few findings already known at that time (other marbles from Mérida; bronze bust of Mithras, etc.), a detail that has not deteriorated the value of this publication.<sup>9</sup> His work became the starting point of many researchers, who even today use the catalogue numbers assigned by García y Bellido when referring to Mithraic monuments. Later

<sup>2</sup> GARCÍA Y BELLIDO, A.: *Esculturas romanas de España y Portugal*, I y II. Madrid 1949; GARCÍA Y BELLIDO, A.: El Mitras tauróctono de Córdoba. *Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia* (1902) 13–16; GARCÍA Y BELLIDO, A.: El Mithras Tauroktonos de Cabra (Córdoba). *Archivo Español de Arqueología* 86 (1952) 389–392.

<sup>3</sup> MÉLIDA, J. R.: Cultos emeritenses de Serapis y Mithras. *Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia* (1914) 439–456.

<sup>4</sup> CUMONT, F.: *Textes et monuments figures relatifs aux Mystères de Mithra*. Vol. I. Brussels 1896, 260.

<sup>5</sup> GARCÍA Y BELLIDO: Les religions orientales (n. 1) 21–23.

<sup>6</sup> GARCÍA Y BELLIDO: Les religions orientales (n. 1) 21.

<sup>7</sup> ALVAR, J. – RODRIGUEZ DE LAS HERAS, L.: Historiografía de los cultos místéricos en Hispania hasta García y Bellido. *Anejos Archivo Español de Arqueología* 34 (2005) 65–74.

<sup>8</sup> LEITE DE VASCONCELOS, J.: *Religiões da Lusitania*. Vol. III. Lisboa 1913, 334–341; PARIS, P.: Restes du culte de Mithra en Espagne. Le mithraeum de Merida. *Revue Archéologique* 2 (1914) 1–31; TOUTAIN, J.: *Les cultes païens dans l'Empire Romain*. I: Les Provinces latines. Paris 1905–1907; LANTIER, R.: *Les dieux orientaux dans la Péninsule Ibérique. Homenagem a Martins Sarmiento*. Guimarães 1933, 185–189.

<sup>9</sup> ALVAR, J.: Cinco lustros de investigación sobre cultos orientales en la Península Ibérica. *Gerión* 11 (1993) 313–326.

publications on the mystery cults in Hispania relegated the iconographic study of the pieces to favour the translation and interpretation of the epigraphic documents.<sup>10</sup> Although García y Bellido's publication was the canon to be followed by other scholars, some of his interpretations began to be questioned.

Jaime Alvar Ezquerro, one of the most renowned specialists in oriental cults in Spain, has shown his interest in the Mithraic cult in numerous publications:<sup>11</sup> he updated García y Bellido's catalogue, deepened in the phenomenological analysis of the cult and studied it from a sociological, economic, historical point of view. He collected 32 testimonies of Mithraic character (figurative monuments and inscriptions) of which, almost half, catalogued as doubtful. The social composition of Mithraic communities, as well as their behaviour within the Roman society, has also centred the interest of Rebeca Rubio Rivera.<sup>12</sup> Following Alvar Ezquerro's line of investigation, she has also focused her work on Mithraic epigraphy.

In the field of Iconographic Studies, we would like to highlight the proposals of Manuel Bendala Galán who, questioning García y Bellido theories, initiated a new research path. As an archaeologist and specialist in the Orientalising period, Bendala brought a new perspective on the Mithraic figurative representations in Spain: he questioned the cultic function of Cordoba's tauroctony (since it was not found in a temple); he also corrected García y Bellido by identifying as Keto the attribute of Oceanus in Mérida (previously considered to be a dolphin) and proposed a new interpretation of

<sup>10</sup> BLAZQUEZ, J. M.: Religión y Urbanismo en Emerita Augusta. *Archivo Español de Arqueología* 55 (1982) 89–106; ARCE MARTINEZ, J.: *España entre el mundo antiguo y el mundo medieval*. Madrid 1988, 190–191; ARCE MARTINEZ, J.: Mérida tardorromana 284–409 d.C. In *Homenaje a Sáenz de Buruaga*. Valencia 1982, 209; MARINER, S.: Nuevos testimonios del culto mitraico en el litoral de la Tarraconense. In *Actas II Congreso Internacional de Estudios sobre las Culturas del Mediterráneo Occidental en 1975*. Madrid 1978, 79–81; FABRE, G. – MAYER, M. – RODA, I.: *Inscriptions romanes de Mataró i la seva àrea. Epigrafia romana del Maresme*. Mataró 1983, 83–88.

<sup>11</sup> ALVAR, J.: El culto a Mitra en Hispania, Paganismo y cristianismo en el occidente del Imperio Romano. *Memorias de Historia Antigua* 5 (1981) 51–72; ALVAR, J.: Problemas metodológicos sobre el préstamo religioso. Formas de difusión en las Religiones Antiguas. In BLANQUEZ PEREZ, C. – ALVAR, J. – WAGNER, C. G. (edd): *Formas de difusión de las religiones antiguas*. Madrid 1993, 31–33; ALVAR, J.: Integración social de esclavos y dependientes en la Península Ibérica a través de los cultos místicos. Esclavage et forme de dépendance. In ANNEQUIN, J. – GARRIDO-HORY, M. (edd): *Religion et anthropologie de l'esclavage et des formes dépendance: Actes du XX<sup>ème</sup> colloque du GIREA*. Paris 1994, 277–278; ALVAR, J.: Exhibición pública y ocultamiento en los misterios. In ALVAR, J. ET AL. (edd): *Ritual y conciencia cívica en el Mundo Antiguo*. Madrid 1995, 185–197; ALVAR, J.: Las religiones orientales. In *Hispania, el legado de Roma en el año de Trajano*. Zaragoza 1998, 275–280; ALVAR, J.: Las religiones místicas en Hispania. In *Religión y magia en la Antigüedad*. Valencia 1999, 35–47.

<sup>12</sup> RUBIO RIVERA, R.: La propaganda de la estética: símbolos exóticos del individuo en la difusión de los misterios orientales. In *Formas de difusión* (n. 11) 1993, 219–230; RUBIO RIVERA, R.: La iniciación mitraica y la supuesta subversión del orden social. In *Ritual y conciencia cívica en el Mundo Antiguo Homenaje F. Gascó*. Madrid, 1995, 215–226; RUBIO RIVERA, R.: Jerarquías religiosas y control social en el mundo antiguo. In ALVAR, J. – HERNÁNDEZ GUERRA, L. (edd): *Jerarquías religiosas y control social en el mundo antiguo. Actas del XXVII Congreso Internacional Girea-Arys IX 2002*. Valladolid 2004, 459–462; RUBIO RIVERA, R.: El leontem de la inscripción de San Gemini: sede de los Leones mitraicos. In MANGAS MANJARRES, J. – ALVAR, J. (edd): *Homenaje a José María Blázquez: de Oriente a Occidente*. Vol. 3. Madrid 1996, 319–329.

the so-called young Aion as “Mithras saxigeno” at the same site.<sup>13</sup> This scholar examined the monuments in detail, deepened in the study of Mithraic attributes, drew parallels with other pieces found in the rest of the Roman Empire and updated the interpretation of the material in the light of the new theories that highlight the importance of Astronomy in the cult of Mithras. These hypotheses meant the renewal of the Mithraic Studies within the Hispanic historiography.

The theses elaborated in 1989 by Julio Muñoz García Vaso and María Antonia Francisco Casado<sup>14</sup> continued the tradition initiated by García y Bellido, being these the last encyclopaedic works dedicated to all the Mithraic monuments recovered in the Iberian Peninsula. In addition, we would like to draw attention to Beatrice Cacciotti’s research, who dedicated an article to the Mithraic findings in Mérida, with special focus on the iconography.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Israel Campos Mendez has distanced himself from these previous authors by interpreting Mithraic iconography in relation to the schools of thought that defend the Eastern origin of the cult.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. TOWARDS A NEW MITHRAIC CATALOGUE: ANALYSIS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES AND RECENT FINDINGS

Since García y Bellido’s publication in 1967, the findings related to the cult of Mithras have multiplied throughout the Iberian Peninsula. However, as Alvar stated, a dramatic increase in the number of testimonies might not imply a qualitative development in the knowledge of this cult,<sup>17</sup> as most of them have been qualified as “uncertain”. Many of the findings have been associated with Mithras because they were recovered in the same place where a previous Mithraic testimony had been exhumed. As for epigraphic documents, there is a great difficulty among the specialists to reach a consensus on whether it is Mithras or *Sol Invictus* who receives the offerings. In addition, due to the fragmented state of many of the epigraphic documents, researchers have offered various interpretations, not always related to the mystery cult.

The inclusion or exclusion of archaeological material in the Mithraic catalogue of Hispania has not followed a homogeneous criterion, a fact that has posed a great obstacle when dealing with the subject in question. The first news on Mithraic monuments in Hispania comes from Mérida, as already stated, in the area known as “cerro

<sup>13</sup> BENDALA GALAN, M.: Las religiones místicas en la España romana. In *Seminario sobre la religión romana en Hispania* 1979. Madrid 1981, 283–299; BENDALA GALAN, M.: Reflexiones sobre la iconografía mitraica en Mérida. In *Homenaje a Sáenz de Buruaga*. Valencia 1982, 99–108.

<sup>14</sup> MUÑOZ GARCÍA VASO, J.: *El culto de Mithra en Hispania: caracteres específicos*. Madrid 1989; FRANCISCO CASADO, M. A.: *El culto de Mithra en Hispania. Catálogo de monumentos esculpidos e inscripciones*. Granada 1989.

<sup>15</sup> CACCIOTTI B.: Culti orientali in Spagne: alcune osservazioni iconografiche. *Escultura Romana en Hispania* 5 (2008) 163–186.

<sup>16</sup> CAMPOS MENDEZ I.: Consideraciones sobre el origen de la iconografía de los misterios mitraicos. *Florentia iliberritana: Revista de estudios de antigüedad clásica* 15 (2004) 9–28.

<sup>17</sup> ALVAR: Cinco lustris (n. 9) 320.

de San Albín”.<sup>18</sup> Several altars dedicated to Mithras and sculptures with Mithraic dedications and a clear Mithraic iconography provided key information on the Mithraic community in the area.<sup>19</sup> In addition, the fact that these were found with monuments representing other “oriental” divinities<sup>20</sup> left archaeologists wondering about the possibility of a great temple dedicated to all these mystery deities.<sup>21</sup>

However, questions quickly arose about the Mithraic character of those anepigraphic findings due to the difficulty to identify the iconography of some marbles.<sup>22</sup> Successive discoveries in the vicinity of this area (such as the Banquet relief) were associated with the Mysteries of Mithras, although we have no basis to support such hypothesis.<sup>23</sup> On the contrary, other sculptures recovered together with this group were discarded from the Mithraic catalogue: as this was considered to be a cult only for men, female representations were left out.<sup>24</sup>

The casual nature of the findings, the lack of organised archaeology field work and the poor conservation of the pieces after being exhumed complicated their documentation. The transcription and translation of the inscriptions centred the interest of the first scholars, who published four small altars<sup>25</sup> and the three sculptures of Oceanus, Mercury and the Dadophor as the irrefutable proof of the presence of Mithras cult in Mérida. Their importance underlies in the presence of three key facts that are frequently absent in the Mithraic archaeological record: the chronology of the monuments (155 AD), the artist’s signature (*Demetrios*) and the highest grade in the community, *Gaius Accius Hedychrus*, referred in the inscriptions as the *Pater*.<sup>26</sup>

Vermaseren compared the Mithraic findings of Mérida with the Aventine in Rome, Walbrook in London, Carnuntum in Austria and Sarmizegetusa in Romania, due to the monumental character of the pieces, the wide iconographic repertoire and the variety of their models.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, some of the pieces recovered in San Albín

<sup>18</sup> MELIDA: Cultos emeritenses (n. 3) 439–440.

<sup>19</sup> Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, Mérida (MNAR): Dadophor (CE00655); Mercury (CE00089); Oceanus (CE00085); Lion-head god (CE00087); Aion-Chronos (CE00086).

<sup>20</sup> MNAR: Serapis (CE00084); Isis (?) (CE00652); Asclepius (CE00120).

<sup>21</sup> MÉLIDA: Cultos emeritenses (n. 3) 454–456.

<sup>22</sup> MNAR: Young male with lion (CE00651); Young male (CE00650); seated Jupiter-Serapis (CE00081); fragments of the attire of a colossal figure (1097(123)); lower part of sculpture (plinth + feet) (CE00121); fragments of marble furniture (CE00681).

<sup>23</sup> MNAR: Banquet relief (CE00127). For this monument see: PARIS (n. 8) 10; MÉLIDA, J. R.: *Catálogo Monumental de España. Provincia de Badajoz, 1907–1910*. Madrid 1925, n° 1096; MOSQUERA MÜLLER, J. L.: Un relieve con escenas de Banquete en el Museo Nacional de Arte Romano de Mérida. *Anas* 1 (1988) 91–98; ARCE MARTINEZ, J.: Noé en Mérida. *Archivo Español de Arqueología* 73 (2000) 285–293.

<sup>24</sup> MNAR: Venus (CE00088); Venus statuette (CE680); female head (CE00682); female funerary statue (CE37425).

<sup>25</sup> MNAR CE00156; CE00188; CE566; the location of one of them is currently unknown: GARCÍA Y BELLIDO: *Les religions orientales* (n. 1) 28.

<sup>26</sup> Transcriptions by J. R. Mérida: Mercury: Anno col(oniae) CLXXX / Invicto deo Mithrae / sac(erdos) / G(aius) Accius Hedychrus / pater / a(nimo) l(ibens) p(osuit).

Dadophor: Invicto sacrum C(aius) Avitus Acc(io) Hedychro Pater / Δημήτριος ἐποίησεν.

Oceanus: C(aius) Acc(ius) Hedychrus / p(ater) p(atrum).

<sup>27</sup> VERMASEREN, M. J.: *Mithras, the Secret God*. London 1963, 43.

were studied by scholars as funerary monuments, since they might have been part of the necropolis situated next to the site,<sup>28</sup> which could have been altered during the works to level the plot and build the aforementioned bullfighting arena. In addition, the heterogeneous group of sculptures found in the Lusitanian capital led some authors to explore the possibility of this being a marble deposit that, for some reason, should no longer remain in sight of the population, perhaps due to the renovation of the temple, a religious change or violent incident, since Mérida warns of the blackening of some of the materials which is usually caused by fire.<sup>29</sup>

The so-called “cosmogonic mosaic” of Mérida has also been a subject of debate among researchers.<sup>30</sup> Situated in a private villa next to San Albín, its location and complex iconography are the main reasons for those who claim it to be connected with the mystery cult. The great mosaic displays a rich representation of the cosmos, full of allegories influenced by philosophical ideas and the astronomical knowledge usually connected with the cult of Mithras. However, its fragmentary state, the different chronology proposed by scholars and the numerous interpretations on the motif has prevented specialists from reaching a consensus.<sup>31</sup>

Also in Lusitania, a Mithraic bas-relief was recovered in Tróia, Portugal, in 1925.<sup>32</sup> Located near the mouth of the Sado river and fragmented in five pieces, the great altar (0.65 m × 0.80 m × 0.09 m) depicts the sacred banquet of Mithras and Sol and the remains of what seems to be a tauroctony (only the bust of Luna, a dadophor and a fragment of the bull’s leg remain).<sup>33</sup> Some authors have conceived of this monument

<sup>28</sup> MNAR CE08241; CE37425; CE00682. BENDALA GALAN, M.: La necrópolis de Mérida. In BLANCO FREJEIRO, A. (ed.): *Augusta Emerita. Actas de Simposio Internacional conmemorativo del bimilenario de Mérida 1975*. Madrid 1976, 143–148.

<sup>29</sup> MELIDA: Cultos emeritenses (n. 3) 444; GARCIA Y BELLIDO: Les religions orientales (n. 1) 26; CACCIOTTI (n. 15) 181–182.

<sup>30</sup> GARCIA SANDOVAL, E.: El mosaico cosmogónico de Mérida. *BSSA* 34/35 (1969) 9–29; GARCIA SANDOVAL, E.: El mosaico cosmogónico de Mérida. In *Actas XI Congreso Nacional de Arqueología*. Zaragoza 1970, 743–768. For a complete bibliography appendix on the mosaic, see: ÁLVAREZ MARTÍNEZ J. M.: *El mosaico cosmológico de Mérida, Eugenio García Sandoval in memoriam*. Mérida 1996 [Cuadernos Emeritenses 12].

<sup>31</sup> BLANCO FREJEIRO, A.: *El mosaico de Mérida con la alegoría del Saeculum Aureum*. Sevilla 1971 [Estudios sobre el mundo helenístico] 153–178; ARCE MARTINEZ, J.: El mosaico cosmológico de Mérida y las Dionisyaca de Nono de Panópolis. In ÁLVAREZ MARTÍNEZ J. M.: *El mosaico cosmológico de Mérida, Eugenio García Sandoval in memoriam* (n. 30) 93–115; CANTO, A. MA.: Saturninus, Augusti libertus. *Gallaecia* 3–4 (1977–78) 3–4; ALFÖLDI, A.: *Aion in Mérida und Aphrodisias*. Mainz 1979, 16–24; BALIL ILLANA, A.: Andras Alföldi “Aion in Mérida und Aphrodisias”. *BSAA* 47 (1981) 514–515; QUET, M. H.: La mosaïque cosmologique de Mérida. *Extrait de Conimbriga* 18 and 19 (1979–1980) 20–21 and 5–12; ALFÖLDI-ROSENBAUM, E.: Mérida Revisited: The Cosmological Mosaic in the Light of Discussions since 1979. *MM* 34 (1993) 254–274.

<sup>32</sup> At present in a private collection, although a cast of the bas-relief can be seen in the Museum Nacional de Arqueologia, Lisboa (nº inv. 997.50.1).

<sup>33</sup> GARCÍA Y BELLIDO: Les religions orientales (n. 1) 36–37; CORREIA, V.: Escavações realizadas na necrópole de Alcácer do Sal em 1926 e 1927. *O Instituto* 75 (1928) 190–201; MARQUES DA COSTA, A. I.: Estudos sobre algumas estações da época luso-romana nos arredores de Setúbal. *O Arqueólogo Português* 29 (1930–1931) 2–8. For a complete bibliographical appendix on the altar, see: RODRÍGUES GONÇALVES, L. J.: *Escultura romana em Portugal: uma arte do quotidiano*. Mérida 2007, 355–359.

as a triptych, although there are different opinions regarding which motif is missing (Mithras *taurophoros*, kneeling Sol, etc.).<sup>34</sup> Due to the good quality of the relief and its similarity to the one preserved in the Musée du Louvre (Fiano Romano),<sup>35</sup> it is believed to have been imported from Italy.<sup>36</sup>

The discovery of three tauroctonies in the province of Baetica (two statues and one unfinished relief) in Igabrum, Italica and Corduba focused the attention of scholars on the southern part of the Peninsula.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps for this very reason, some authors have included in the Mithraic catalogue a series of monuments that present an uncertain ascription to the cult. Such is the case of an anepigraphic altar with the representation of a standing bull and vegetal motifs, which has been considered to combine elements of different cults: Mithras and Bacchus.<sup>38</sup> In addition, another altar recovered in Barbate (Cádiz) in 1949–1950 has also been associated with the Mithraic cult.<sup>39</sup> The marble monolith presents in its upper section the decoration of a bucranium with a crescent and a star, all of them encircled by a vegetal wreath. Two torches seem to form a triangular pediment, while two flowers also encircled by wreaths evoke the pulvini.

Just as in Mérida, the fortuitousness of the findings in this province has complicated the study of their archaeological context, as the interest of private collectors prevailed over the scientific approach. In addition, there are certain pieces whose origins we ignore. A small bronze bust,<sup>40</sup> possibly a carriage fitting representing Mithras, might not be a testimony of his cult, as Alvar argued that it is an object of daily use and not part of a ritual ceremony. Although it belonged to a private collection, its location today is unknown. Another bronze usually excluded from the Mithraic catalogue comes from Italica: it is a forgery, a fake that represented the birth of Mithras with an inscription that had already been found in Gallia and Germania.<sup>41</sup> Only a schematic drawing made by Paris remains, as its whereabouts is unknown.

<sup>34</sup> GARCÍA Y BELLIDO: Les religions orientales (n. 1) 36–37; MUÑOZ GARCÍA VASO (n. 14) 877–878; FRANCISCO CASADO (n. 14) 43–45; GORDON, R. L.: Panelled complications. *JMS* 3 (1980) 200–227.

<sup>35</sup> Musée du Louvre inv. Ma 3441.

<sup>36</sup> PEREIRA, P.: *Arte Portuguesa – História Essencial*. Lisboa 2014, 155–156.

<sup>37</sup> GARCÍA Y BELLIDO: Les religions orientales (n.1) n° 28 and 33; ALVAR: El culto (n. 11) n° 31. Museo Arqueológico de Sevilla REP06995; Museo Arqueológico y Etnológico de Córdoba CE005783 and CE13164.

<sup>38</sup> GARCÍA Y BELLIDO, A.: Cuatro esculturas romanas inéditas. *Archivo Español de Arqueología* 23 (1950) 367–370; GARCÍA Y BELLIDO: Les religions orientales (n. 1) 39–40; ALVAR: El culto (n. 11) 56; BELTRAN FORTES, J. – RODRIGUEZ HIDALGO, J. M.: *Itálica. Espacios de culto en el anfiteatro*. Universidad de Sevilla 2004, 167–173; BELTRAN FORTES, J.: *Las arae de la Bética*. Tesis doctoral. Universidad de Málaga, 1988, 175.

<sup>39</sup> BELTRAN, M. – LOZA AZUAGA, M. L.: El culto mitraico en la costa atlántica bética: un nuevo testimonio en Barbate (Cádiz). In *El Estrecho de Gibraltar. Actas del Congreso Internacional*. Madrid 1988, 833–844; SAEZ ESPLIGARES, A.: Hallazgos arqueológicos en Barbate. *Boletín Museo de Cádiz* 2 (1979–1980) 45–47; MUÑOZ GARCÍA VASO (n. 14) 771–775.

<sup>40</sup> ALVAR: El culto (n. 11) 56; 70; E. ROMERO DE TORRES: Montilla romana y visigótica. Nuevos descubrimientos arqueológicos. *BRAH* 58 (1911) 76.

<sup>41</sup> ALVAR: El culto (n. 11) 70; MUÑOZ GARCÍA VASO (n. 14) 766–768; PARIS (n. 8) 2.

Although excluded by most of the authors who have analysed the Mithraic *corpus* in Hispania, we would like to draw attention to the only piece related to this mystery cult preserved in the National Archaeological Museum (Madrid).<sup>42</sup> It is a small gem of green jasper in which Mithras killing the bull is represented, according to the canonical model. Despite the lack of documentation of its provenance, it is estimated that it would not have come from local excavations.<sup>43</sup>

### 2.1. New Discoveries in Lusitania

Excavations during the last decades, however, have produced numerous testimonies that have been associated with the Mysteries of Mithras in Hispania. The location of Mérida's Mithraeum continues to be an unanswered question, although some authors have found a Mithraic cult space in the southern part of the city, very close to San Albín and the cosmogonic mosaic.<sup>44</sup> This structure seems to be attached to a pre-existing one, on a lower level, with a tripartite floorplan and *podia* attached to side walls. Among the recovered pieces found in the central corridor, there are two altars: one of them decorated with rich polychrome and another presenting a triangular shape, resembling the bull's forehead. In addition, fragments of ceramics and bone have been recovered in this site, although none of them present a specific Mithraic motif.

Recently, the Museo Nacional de Arte Romano in Mérida has carried out a complete revision of the collection, which has allowed scholars to recover the original records of certain fragments associated with the Mithraic site of San Albín.<sup>45</sup> Most of them are small pieces from this area of the city or the theatre's storehouse, a place that was used as a deposit during the first excavations in Mérida.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the findings from the beginning of the 20th century were re-examined, especially those fragments understood by Mérida as part of a representation of a fertility goddess (large clothes and ears of wheat).<sup>47</sup> A new publication has offered an alternative interpretation: these would actually be part of Mithra's chlamys and the tail of the bull already transformed into a spike, a popular motif in Mithraic iconography.<sup>48</sup> Thus, we could affirm that the great tauroctony of Mérida's Mithraeum has finally been found.

<sup>42</sup> Museo Arqueológico Nacional inv. 313; CASAL GARCÍA, R.: *Colección de glíptica del Museo Arqueológico Nacional*. Madrid, 1990 [Serie de entalles romanos] n° 345.

<sup>43</sup> PEREA YÉBENES, S.: Simbolismo astrológico del cuervo en la tauroctonia mithraica. *BMAN* 17 (1999) 49–58.

<sup>44</sup> BARRIENTOS, T.: Nuevos datos para el estudio de las religiones orientales en Occidente: Un espacio de culto mitraico en la zona Sur de Mérida. *Mérida, Excavaciones Arqueológicas* 5 (1999) 357–381.

<sup>45</sup> RODRIGUEZ AZCARRAGA, A. M.: Fragmentos relivarios del santuario de los dioses orientales de Augusta Emerita. *Anas* 19–20 (2006/7) 267–278.

<sup>46</sup> Other fragments that might be associated with Mithraic iconography: the hindquarters of a rampant dog (inv. n° 4129), the body of a lion (inv. n° 7481), a snake head (inv. n° 7500).

<sup>47</sup> MÉLIDA: Cultos emeritenses (n. 3) 449; fragment of Mithra's chlamys (0.85 m × 0.45 m × 0.10 m) recorded 1097(123); fragment of the spike (0.41 m × 0.35 m × 0.10 m) recorded 1098(124).

<sup>48</sup> RODRIGUEZ AZCARRAGA (n. 45) 271.



## 2.2. *New Discoveries in Tarraconensis*

Even though we had evidence of the cult of Mithras in the province *Tarraconensis* thanks to a series of inscriptions,<sup>49</sup> the discovery of the Mithraeum associated with the Villa dels Munts in Tarragona (2nd century AD) in 2004<sup>50</sup> has constituted one of the major contributions to the study of this cult in Hispania since the publication of García y Bellido. The large dimensions of the temple resemble the ones found in the Baths of Caracalla (30 × 8.10 m). The structure was built *ex novo*, standing on the slight deviation of the floor plan in relation to the orthogonality of the complex. Located near the garden, the *triclinium* and the southern baths, its position near the waterways and the kitchen service would have been of vital importance for the ceremonies in the temple. No plastic representation related to the cult of Mithras, however, has been recovered so far. Only anepigraphic altars, possibly dedicated to the *dado-phors* (given their positions in the temple), have been found, along with a triangular altar. A marble fragment recovered in the rubble that covered the Mithraeum (posterior to its use as a mystery sanctuary) shows part of a draped cloth, possibly a robe or tunic, and the naked figure of a small male in front of it.<sup>51</sup> Although there is not an exact parallel in the *LIMC*, we believe that it was part of a representation of Venus with Cupid.<sup>52</sup>

The discovery of a Mithraeum in a *domus* from the 3rd–4th century AD (15.5 m × 7 m) within the walls of the city of Lugo, called into question (once again) the role played by the Roman army in the dissemination of the Mithraic cult in Hispania.<sup>53</sup> The votive inscription offered by *C. Victorius Victorinus* to Mithras, centurion of the *Legio VII* in 212–218, has been connected with the testimony found in 1913 in Mérida by *M. Valerius Secundus*, *frumentarius* of the same legion in 155 AD. Thus, researchers are now focusing their attention on the city of *Legio VII* (León) in the hope that future excavations could reveal the source of the cult's dissemination. As for the material recovered in the excavations, publications have echoed the finding of several oil lamps and a few fragments of bronze that might have been part of the tauroctony.<sup>54</sup>

The fortuitous finding of a Mithraic altar in 1974 in Can de Modolell, Cabrera de Mar (Barcelona) led several scholars to identify the site as a rural sanctuary dedicated

<sup>49</sup> GARCIA Y BELLIDO: *Les religions orientales* (n. 1) n° 21–27.

<sup>50</sup> TARRATS, F. – REMOLA VALLVERDU, J. A. – SANCHEZ, J.: *La vil·la romana dels Munts (Altafulla, Tarragonès) i Tarraco*. In *Tribuna d'arqueologia*. Barcelona 2006, 213–227; TARRATS, F. – REMOLA VALLVERDU, J. A.: *La vil·la romana dels Munts (Altafulla, Tarragonès)*. *El territori de Tarraco. Vil·les romanes del Camp de Tarragona*. *Forum* 13 (2008) 17.

<sup>51</sup> MNAT EM-04-2604-2.

<sup>52</sup> KOPPEL E. M. – RODA, I.: *La escultura de las villae de la zona del noreste hispánico: los ejemplos de Tarragona y Tossa*. In OCHOA, F. – GIL SENDINO, F. – GARCIA-ENTERO, V. (edd): *Las villae tardorromanas en el occidente del Imperio: arquitectura y función*. Gijón 2008, 102.

<sup>53</sup> RODRÍGUEZ CAO, C.: *A domus do Mitreo*. Catálogo de la exposición. Universidad Santiago de Compostela, 2011; ALVAR, J. – GORDON R. – RODRÍGUEZ, C.: *The Mithraeum at Lugo (Lucus Augusti) and its connection with Legio VII Gemina*. *JRA* 19 (2006) 267–277.

<sup>54</sup> FERNANDEZ IBÁÑEZ, C.: *A Domus do Mitreo*. *Catálogo de exposición*. Santiago de Compostela 2011, 78, 134.

to Mithras.<sup>55</sup> Two other inscriptions recovered years later have shown a specific devotion in the area to the god Cautes-Mithras (2nd half of 2nd century AD).<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately, plunder and several clandestine excavations altered the archaeological context, preventing the possibility of an exhaustive study of the stratigraphy. In the 80s, researchers focused on the study of the cryptoporticus, which was associated with the cult of Mithras due the semi-subterranean layout, although this hypothesis was finally discarded.<sup>57</sup> However, it was in this structure where the upper part of an altar was recovered, decorated with two small heads as pulvini surrounded by vegetal and zoomorphic elements. Although these decorative motifs are not exclusively Mithraic, some authors have spotted a resemblance with the altar from the temple of San Clemente in Rome.<sup>58</sup>

In addition, a fragment of an Egyptian alabaster *labrum* decorated with a snake on the rim was also found in Can de Modollet, which could have also been part of the Mithraeum, as numerous vessels with this motif have been exhumed in Mithraic context (Shlangengefäß<sup>59</sup>). Other findings in the site (a bronze sheet, possibly decorated with birds; an inscription dedicated to Neptune; a bronze lion fitting) have also been associated with the mystery cult, although their functions have not been clarified yet. Moreover, fragments of sculpture made out of Paros, Carrara and Pentelic marble might point to the great purchasing power and good taste of the owner. These marbles, possibly from Attic workshops, could have been acquired only by the upper classes, a fact that had led scholars to reflect upon the possibility of Can Modollet being an imperial property.<sup>60</sup>

Already recorded by García y Bellido,<sup>61</sup> the Mithraic inscription from Font de Mussa, in Benifaió, have led scholars to consider the site as a sanctuary dedicated to the mystery god.<sup>62</sup> In 1989 and 2001, new excavations revealed the floorplan of the villa (2nd–3rd century AD) and a great mosaic that represents the origins of Rome. However, no further testimony of the cult has been recovered.

<sup>55</sup> ALVAR: El culto (n. 11) n° 20; Museu de Mataró 02752. IRC I 85. CLARIANA, J. F. – JARREGA, R.: Aportación al conocimiento de unas estructuras arquitectónicas tardorromanas del yacimiento arqueológico de Can Modollet. *Archivo Español de Arqueología* 63 (1990) 330–344

<sup>56</sup> IRC I 86 and 206; PLA PEREA C. – REVILLA CALVO, V.: El santuario romano de Can Modollet (Cabrera de Mar, Barcelona) Nuevas aportaciones para su interpretación. *Empúries* 53 (2002) 220; BONAMUSA, J.: Els testimonis mitraics iluronencs dins el context de la Tarraconense. *Laietania* 2–3 (1985) 248–253; PASCUAL, R.: *La religió de Mitra. Els elements mitraics de Can Modollet* [El coleccionable de la Fundació Burriac 5]. Cabrera de Mar 1994, 6–12.

<sup>57</sup> PLA PEREA, C. – REVILLA CALVO, V.: El santuario romano de Can Modollet. Nuevas aportaciones para su interpretación. *Empúries* 53 (2002) 211–239; CLARIANA, J. F. ET AL: Aportacions a l'estudi del criptopòrtic de Can Modollet (Cabrera de Mar). *Sessió d'Estudis Mataronins* 17 (2000) 165–200.

<sup>58</sup> BONAMUSA (n. 56) 248–253; CLARIANA (n. 57) 175.

<sup>59</sup> SWOBODA, E.: Die Schlange im Mithraskult. *JOAI* 30 (1937) 1–27.

<sup>60</sup> RODA, I.: L'antiguitat. In *Art de Catalunya. Ars cataloniae*. Vol. 6: Escultura antiga i medieval. Barcelona 1997, 10–92.

<sup>61</sup> GARCIA Y BELLIDO: Les religions orientales (n. 1) n° 23.

<sup>62</sup> BELTRAN LOPEZ, F.: La vil·la romana de Font de Mussa, Benifaió. Materials arqueològics. *Al Gezira* 7 (1992) 37–78; GOMEZ SERRANO, N. P.: Estaciones arqueológicas. El Mithraeum de la Fuente de Muza, en Benifayó de Espioca. *Diario de Valencia* 1922, junio 28, 6–8.

Near the villa of Font de Mussa, in the city of Sagunto, a new inscription has been associated with the cult of Mithras in the Peninsula. Five fragments of marble found in a favissa from the 2nd century AD might have confirmed a monumental inscription interpreted as [A]ed[es] [Mi]thrae.<sup>63</sup> However, no architectural remains or monuments have been recovered.

In the 1990s, scholars resumed their works in San Juan de la Isla, Asturias, where a Mithraic inscription had already been found.<sup>64</sup> The document shows the presence of the grades of *Leo* and *Pater* in the community, as well as a repetitive formula identified with magical reiterations. This interpretation led to the search of the temple in which the community could have gathered: in 1997 its possible location near the beach line was published.<sup>65</sup> A natural cave, near a church and a necropolis, might have played a key role in the liturgy, although no iconographic representation of the cult has been found.

### 2.3. New Discoveries in Baetica

In the Roman villa of Fuente Álamo in Puente Genil (Córdoba) was found in 1985 a small room interpreted as a Mithraeum by archaeologists.<sup>66</sup> The villa sits on a pre-existing residence from the first half of the 1st century AD, possibly related to the cult of waters, springs, etc. The so-called “room 10” shows a tripartite layout (7 m × 4.80 m) with a wide aisle flanked by lateral tribunes with a semi-circular apse, all paved with a geometric mosaic. No decoration of the temple, possibly built between the 2nd and 3rd century AD, has been recovered.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, we would like to include in the list of recently found Mithraea the so-called Tomb of the Elephant in the Roman necropolis on Carmona (Sevilla). Conceived since its discovery as a family tomb, a *collegium funeraticium* or a sanctuary dedicated to Cybele and Attis, today its function is being reviewed.<sup>68</sup> The latest research,

<sup>63</sup> MELCHOR, J. M. – BENDITO, J.: La excavación del solar de la plaza de la Moreira Vella y la Saguntum romana. *Arse* 39 (2005) 11–34; CORELL, J. – SEGUI, J. J.: Fragmentos de inscripciones monumentales romanas de Sagunto. *SEBarc* 6 (2008) 74.

<sup>64</sup> GARCIA Y BELLIDO: Les religions orientales (n. 1) n° 26; GARCIA MARTINEZ, S. M.: Ritual y culto a Mitra en el Conventus Asturum. *O Arqueólogo Português* ser. IV, 13–15 (1995–1997) 287–297.

<sup>65</sup> ADAN, G. E. – CID, R. M.: Nuevas aportaciones sobre el culto a Mithra en Hispania. La comunidad de San Juan de la Isla (Asturias). *Memorias de Historia Antigua* 18 (1997) 257–297.

<sup>66</sup> LEÓN, P.: *Arte romano en la Bética. Arquitectura y Urbanismo*. Sevilla 2008, 334–335. However, this theory is currently under revision and alternative interpretations to this room have been proposed.

<sup>67</sup> LOPEZ PALOMO, L. A.: Arqueología. El complejo arqueológico de Fuente Álamo (Puente Genil). Excavaciones actualmente en marcha. *Arte, Arqueología e Historia* 14 (2007) 153; LOPEZ PALOMO, L. A.: *Actividad arqueológica puntual en Fuente Álamo (Puente Genil)*. 2ª parte: Relación y descripción de unidades estratigráficas 2005–2011. Córdoba 2011, 310–316.

<sup>68</sup> The bibliographic corpus devoted to the Tomb of the Elephant is of such dimensions that we refer directly, as a synthesis, to the publication of JIMÉNEZ HERNÁNDEZ, A. – CARRASCO GÓMEZ, I.: La tumba del Elefante en la Necrópolis Romana de Carmona. Una revisión necesaria desde la Arqueología de la Arquitectura y la Arqueoastronomía. *Archivo Español de Arqueología* 85 (2012) 119–139.

carried out under the methodological principles of the archaeology of architecture and archaeo-astronomy, points to the possible use of the complex as a Mithraeum.<sup>69</sup> Bendala had already referred to the symbolic and religious function of the opening between the main chamber and a pedestal, since its orientation and inclination intercept the solar path in certain periods.

### 3. ICONOGRAPHY: A NEW APPROACH

Due to the multiplicity of findings in the Iberian Peninsula during the last twenty years, it was necessary to revise and update the catalogues elaborated since García y Bellido and Alvar. Although our research has focused on the iconographic study of the pieces, we have faced the same problems that traditionally troubled those interested in epigraphy: *Sol Invictus* is not always associated with Mithras, while the representation of a bull is not necessarily an indication of the Mithraic cult. As we have already briefly summarised concerning the latest discoveries, we will analyse in the next pages the iconography of these monuments.

#### 3.1. *Tauroctony*

##### 3.1.1. *Unfinished Altar from Italica (Baetica)*

Found in five fragments, it depicts the silhouette of Mithras killing the bull. Possibly left unfinished due to the poor expertise of a local artist (fig. 1).

##### 3.1.2. *Fragment of Mithras Tauroctonos from Córdoba (Baetica)*

Provenance unknown, although traditionally considered to be from Cabra or Córdoba.<sup>70</sup> Mistaken for a representation of Diana, it was later interpreted as Mithras *tauroctonos*.<sup>71</sup> The sculpture in the round, poorly preserved; made out of Pavonazetto marble, native to Phrygia. The foreign origin and the quality of the material might point to the refined taste and purchasing power of the neophyte (fig. 2).

##### 3.1.3. *Sculpture in the Round from Igabrum (Baetica)*

The best preserved tauroctony in Hispania seems to emulate the great prototypes of the metropolis. Excavations carried out in the place of the discovery have verified that the piece was part of the decorative repertoire of the *piscina* in the villa's *peristylum*,

<sup>69</sup> JIMENEZ HERNANDEZ – CARRASCO GOMEZ (n. 68) 131–137.

<sup>70</sup> GARCIA Y BELLIDO, A.: Parerga de arqueología y epigrafía hispanorromana: Córdoba. Un nuevo Mithra tauroktonos. *Archivo Español de Arqueología* 44 (1971) 142–145; ALVAR: El culto (n. 11) 56, 64; ALVAR, J.: Los cultos místicos en la Bética. In *Actas del I Congreso de Historia Antigua de Andalucía*. Vol. 2. Córdoba 1993, 231–232.

<sup>71</sup> GARCIA Y BELLIDO: Parerga (n. 70) 142.



Fig. 1. Unfinished tauroctony altar from Italica (Baetica), 2nd–3rd century AD.  
Museo Arqueológico de Sevilla (<http://ceres.mcu.es/>)

along with a sculpture of Bacchus, a circumstance that would deprive the tauroctony of its cultural function.<sup>72</sup> Archaeologists believe that it might have been re-used as a mere decorative element, after the Mithraeum where it was originally situated ceased to exist.<sup>73</sup> Other scholars have suggested that Mithras and Bacchus could have been part of an iconographic programme associated with the idea of regeneration, pointing to the villa owners' taste for collecting, a popular custom among provincial elites<sup>74</sup> (fig. 3).

<sup>72</sup> BLANCO, A. – GARCÍA, J. – BENDALA, M.: Excavaciones en Cabra (Córdoba), La casa de Mithra. *Habis* 3 (1972) 300.

<sup>73</sup> MORENO ALCAIDE, M.: La villa del Mitra (Cabra). Puesta al día en las investigaciones. *Antiquitas* 23 (2011) 184–185; BAENA DE ALCAZAR, L.: Los programas de decoración escultórica en las villae de la Bética. *Mainake* 29 (2007) 204; GARRIGUET MATA, J. A.: Imágenes sin poder. Destrucción, reutilización y abandono de las estatuas romanas en la Corduba tardoantigua. In VAQUERIZO, D. – GARRIGUET, J. A. – LEON, A. (edd): *Ciudad y Territorio: Transformaciones materiales e ideológicas entre la época clásica y el Altomedievo*, Servicio de Publicaciones. Córdoba, 85–89.

<sup>74</sup> NAPOLITANO, M. C.: La decorazione scultorea delle villae romane in Baetica. *SPAL* 23 (2014) 183–187.



Fig. 2. Fragment of Mithras tauroctonos from Córdoba (Baetica), 2nd–3rd century AD. Museo Arqueológico y Etnológico de Córdoba (<http://ceres.mcu.es/>)

#### 3.1.4. *Fragment from Tróia Altar (Lusitania)*

Only a small fragment remains attached to the scene of the banquet: Cautopates can be seen on the right, as most of the icons found in the Western provinces.<sup>75</sup>

#### 3.1.5. *Fragment from San Albin, Mérida (Lusitania)*

Two fragments depict Mithra's chlamys (with rests of red polychrome) and the bull's tail already transformed into ears of wheat. Local marble from Borba-Estremoz and the good quality of the technique might allude to Demetrios (artist that signed the sculpture of the dadophor from San Albín)<sup>76</sup> (fig. 4 and fig. 5).

<sup>75</sup> HINNELLS, J. R.: The iconography of Cautes and Cautopates, the data. *JMS* 1 (1976) 38–40.

<sup>76</sup> RODRÍGUEZ AZCÁRRAGA (n. 45) 272.





Fig. 3. Tauroctony from Igabrum, (Lusitania), 2nd–3rd century AD.  
Museo Arqueológico y Etnológico de Córdoba (<http://ceres.mcu.es/>)



Fig. 4. Fragments of Mithra's chlamys from San Albín, Mérida (Lusitania), c. 155 AD.  
Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, Mérida (photo by the author)



Fig. 5. Fragments of the tauroctony from San Albín, Mérida (Lusitania), c. 155 AD.  
Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, Mérida (photo by the author)

### *3.2. Sacred Banquet*

#### *3.2.1. Altar from Tróia (Lusitania)*

The main preserved scene shows Mithras and Sol sharing the banquet while assisted by Cautes and Cautopates; between the dadophors, there is a large crater with a coiled snake. A small fragment of the tauroctony can be seen on the left. Cautopates is also





Fig. 6. Altar from Tróia (Lusitania), 3rd century AD.  
Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, Lisboa (www.matriznet.dgpc.pt)

situated on the right in the banquet, with his torch down. This monument seems to display the two main icons of the cult, which were usually placed at the head of the temple.<sup>77</sup> A number of “reversible” altars have been found with both depictions,<sup>78</sup> hinting the possibility of this being a diptych (fig. 6).

### 3.2.2. Relief Found Near San Albín, Mérida (Lusitania)

This is interpreted as part of a Mithraic altar with two scenes: Mithras’s birth and the sacred banquet. Nowadays, it is believed to have been part of a Christian sarcophagus with scenes of Noah out of the ark and an agape feast. We believe it is not a testimony of Mithras’s cult (fig. 7).

## 3.3. Mithras

### 3.3.1. Bronze Bust from Munda (Baetica)

The current location is unknown; it represents the bust of Mithras dressed in a tunic and a chlamys fit with a fibula on the right shoulder. His face has smooth and round features, full cheeks and half-open mouth. His head is covered by a Phrygian cap, although solar rays are mixed with his curly hair.<sup>79</sup> Due to the quadrangular fitting at the back, it has been interpreted as a carriage decoration.

<sup>77</sup> ROMERO MAYORGA, C.: The importance of colour in the Mysteries of Mithras: the case of the Altar from Tróia. *O Arqueólogo Português* (2017) 1–10 (in press).

<sup>78</sup> *CIMRM* 641, 1083, 1896.

<sup>79</sup> Mithras with Phrygian cap and solar rays also recovered in Mitreo delle Pareti Dipinte and Mitreo degli Animali (Ostia Antica); Carnuntum (*CIMRM* 1683) and British Museum n° 1814,0704.746.



Fig. 7. Banquet relief from Mérida (Lusitania), 3rd–4th century AD.  
Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, Mérida (<http://ceres.mcu.es/>)

### 3.3.2. *Altar from Calle Espronceda, Mérida (Lusitania)*

Only the lower part of the polychrome altar remains, depicting a standing male figure surrounded by vegetation. Probably wearing a short tunic and sandals, the scene is framed by a thick red line. The iconography closely resembles the *lar* gods.<sup>80</sup>

## 3.4. *Dadophor*

### 3.4.1. *Dadophor from San Albín, Mérida (Lusitania)*

Sculpted in local marble from Estremoz, the piece has not preserved its head or arms. He wears a short tunic with a double belt, anaxyrides and a great chlamys that covers the right shoulder. A tree trunk with a dolphin was situated on the left flank to reinforce its stability. Due to the position of his shoulders and what is left of his arms, along with the marine attribute, we believe it might represent Cautopates, as he may have held the torch downwards with both hands.<sup>81</sup> The dolphin could be associated with Oceanus as a liminal divinity, who marked the end of the day. Moreover, the

<sup>80</sup> BARRIENTOS (n. 44) 375.

<sup>81</sup> We worked with several parallels found in the Empire: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin inv. sk202; Museum Darmstadt; CIMRM 2120-1; Musée du Louvre AO22260.



Fig. 8. Sculpture of a Dadophor from Mérida (Lusitania), 155 AD.  
Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, Mérida (<http://ceres.mcu.es/>)

Sculpture of Mercury (Lusitania), 155 AD.  
Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, Mérida (<http://ceres.mcu.es/>)

Sculpture of Oceanus (Lusitania), posterior to 155 AD.  
Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, Mérida (<http://ceres.mcu.es/>)

monuments from Numidia and Bologna also show a connection between Cautopates and the liquid element.<sup>82</sup> Certain formal similarities can be found in sculptures from North Africa<sup>83</sup> (fig. 8).

<sup>82</sup> *CIMRM* 123 and 694.

<sup>83</sup> The dolphin has a small fish in his mouth, just like the Venus from Cirene. See MUÑOZ GARCÍA VASO (n. 14) 806. Also, the patterns of the drapes remind of those in figures from Leptis Magna. See SQUARCIAPINO, M. F.: *Cultura artística di Mérida romana*. In *Homenaje a Sáenz de Buruaga*. Valencia 1982, 45–47.



Fig. 9. Sculpture of Aion (Lusitania), 2nd century AD.  
 Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, Mérida (<http://ceres.mcu.es/>)  
 Sculpture of Lion-head god (Lusitania), 2nd century AD.  
 Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, Mérida (<http://ceres.mcu.es/>)

### 3.5. *Lion-headed God*

#### Lion-headed God from San Albín, Mérida (Lusitania)

This is a male winged figure, with a mutilated lion's head; his arms and legs are missing. He wears anaxarydes<sup>84</sup> and a snake coils three times around his body. Interpreted as Chronos, Saturn or a daimon for those initiated into the Leo grade,<sup>85</sup> no attribute usually associated with his iconography has been found (keys, sceptre, torch, rays, etc.) (fig. 9).

<sup>84</sup> Similar to the Mithraic lion head god from Palazzo Colonna.

<sup>85</sup> LEGGE, F.: The lion-headed god of the Mithraic Mysteries. *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology* 34 (1912) 125; GALL, H.: The lion-head and the human-headed god in the Mithraic Mysteries. *Acta Iranica* 4 (1978) 511; DUSSAUD, R.: Le dieu mithriaque Léontocéphale. *Syria* 27 (1950) 254; JACKSON, H.: The meaning and function of the leontocephaline in Roman Mithraism. *Numen* 32 (1985) 18; BORTOLIN, R.: *Il Leontocefalo dei Misteri mitriaci. L'identità enigmatica di un dio*. Padova 2012, 165–192.

### 3.6. *Aion*

#### Aion from San Albín, Mérida (Lusitania)

This is a young, naked, standing male with a snake coiling five times around his body. A lion-mask is situated on his chest, while the depiction of a goat is next to his left foot. At the back, two perforations on the marble could have been used to attach bronze wings. Another zodiac symbol could possibly have been represented flanking his right side. The god could have held several attributes due to the strong marble braces that joined his arms and hip. Interpreted as Mithras *saxigeno* by Bendala, we consider him to be a divinity associated with Time, similar to the monument from Modena<sup>86</sup> and in connection with the Lion-head god. Only in San Albin, however, have both divinities have been recovered together (fig. 9).

### 3.7. *Other Divinities*

#### 3.7.1. *Mercury*

##### Mercury from San Albin, Mérida (Lusitania)

A seated Mercury with lyre constitutes an *unicum* in Mithraic archaeology, due to its monumental dimensions and iconography. His ascription to the cult is proved by the epigraphic document on the musical instrument. We propose a new interpretation of this divinity based on the large number of representations found in Mithraea. Its importance not only lies in his role as the guardian of the first grade (*Corax*) but also as a parallel of Mithras himself: they were both born in a cave; they both robbed cattle/bulls and then had to make amends with solar divinities.<sup>87</sup> These similarities could have favoured the initiation process of the neophytes, as they would have already been familiar with Mercury's myths (fig. 8)

#### 3.7.2. *Oceanus*

##### Oceanus from San Albín, Mérida (Lusitania)

This is a male figure lying on his left side with a cornucopia while resting his arm on a dolphin or Keto. The head, arms, and feet are missing. The base of the sculpture depicts wavy lines that evoke the movement of the sea. His ascription to the mystery cult is proved by the inscription on the figure's mantle (fig. 8)

<sup>86</sup> CIMRM 695.

<sup>87</sup> ROMERO MAYORGA, C.: Mercury with Lyre: a new interpretation of a Mithraic sculpture found in Hispania. Tra lyra e aulos. Tradizioni musicale e generi poetici. *Quaderni della Rivista di cultura classica e medioevale* 14 (2016) 199–206.

### 3.7.3. *Venus*

#### Fragment of Sculpture Found in the Villa dels Munts (Tarraconensis)

Although no clear parallel has been found in the LIMC, the marble representation possibly depicts Venus and Cupid. Discovered in the Mithraeum of Els Munts, it was recovered in a posterior archaeological context. Hence, there is not a clear connection with the cult.

#### Sculpture of Venus and Cupid from San Albín, Mérida (Lusitania)

This represents Venus Anadyomene with Cupid riding on a dolphin; the head, right arm and Cupid's face are missing. Usually left out of the local Mithraic catalogue (fig. 10)

#### Statuette of Venus from San Albín (Lusitania)

Severely damaged, only the body is preserved. There is evidence of abrasion and fire. Usually left out of the local Mithraic catalogue.

### 3.7.4. *Serapis*

#### Head of Serapis from San Albín (Lusitania)

Slightly bigger than natural size, it represents Serapis according to the Hellenistic prototype of the god. Other examples of this iconography have been found in the Mithraea of Santa Prisca and Walbrook.<sup>88</sup>

### 3.7.5. *Asclepius*

#### Sculpture of Asclepius from San Albín, Mérida (Lusitania)

This is a standing male figure in *contrapposto*, clothed in an *himation* that leaves his chest uncovered. His head, hands, feet and attribute are missing. A recent study has suggested that the material of this sculpture might come from Aphrodisias, hinting to the possibility of this being an import.<sup>89</sup> A small statuette of the god was found in the Mithraeum of Santa Prisca.

### 3.7.6. *Male Figure*

#### Sculpture of a Male Figure with Lion from Mérida (Lusitania)

Identified as a dadophor or a "Mithraic character" by the first archaeologists,<sup>90</sup> it represents a naked young male figure in *contrapposto* wearing a chlamys with a seated lion

<sup>88</sup> CIMRM 479 and 818.

<sup>89</sup> LAPUENTE, P. ET AL: White marble sculptures from the National Museum of Roman Art (Mérida): sources of local and imported marbles. *European Journal of Mineralogy* 26 (2014) 351.

<sup>90</sup> MÉLIDA: Cultos emeritenses (n. 3) 452. For a new interpretation: ROMERO MAYORGA, C.: A new Interpretation of a Mithraic Sculpture in Augusta Emerita, Hispania. In *Proceedings of the 13th International Colloquium on Roman Provincial Art, Bucharest 2013*. Bucharest 2015, 13–21.





Fig. 10. Sculpture of Mercury (Lusitania), 2nd century AD.  
 Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, Mérida (<http://ceres.mcu.es/>)  
 Sculpture of Venus (Lusitania), 2nd century AD.  
 Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, Mérida (<http://ceres.mcu.es/>)  
 Sculpture of male figure with parazonium (Lusitania), 2nd century AD.  
 Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, Mérida (<http://ceres.mcu.es/>)  
 Sculpture of a female figure (Lusitania), 2nd century AD.  
 Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, Mérida (<http://ceres.mcu.es/>)  
 Sculpture of a male figure with lion (Lusitania), 2nd century AD.  
 Museo Nacional de Arte Romano, Mérida (<http://ceres.mcu.es/>)

flanking his right side. His arms and, thus, his attributes are missing. Although this prototype closely resembles the one of Bacchus with panther,<sup>91</sup> we believe that his rounded face features, his full cheeks and his wavy hair are usually associated with solar divinities. Sol appears with a lion in the Mithraic relief of Villa Altieri<sup>92</sup> (fig. 10).

#### Sculpture of a Male Figure with *paludamentum* from Mérida (Lusitania)

Male standing figure severely damaged (head, right hand and left leg missing). Catalogued in the MNAR as Cautes, it has been interpreted also as a hero or deified character.<sup>93</sup> He holds in his left hand a *parazonium*, an attribute usually associated with emperors, Mars and the Dioscuri. Usually left out of the local Mithraic catalogue (fig. 10).

#### 3.7.7. Female Figure

##### Sculpture of a Female from San Albín, Mérida (Lusitania)

A standing female figure wearing a long tunic with two belts. The head, right arm and left hand have not been preserved. The lack of attributes and the poor quality of the sculpture have complicated the identification of the statue. Provincial interpretation of a Hellenistic Rhodian prototype,<sup>94</sup> it has been considered to represent Isis or Venus.<sup>95</sup> Usually left out of the local Mithraic catalogue (fig. 10)

### 3.8. Bull

#### 3.8.1. Anepigraphic Altar from Italica (Baetica)

Decorated on the four fronts: a standing and right facing bull, a tree with fruits, five ears of wheat and bunches of grapes. Authors have associated the vegetal elements with the transformation of the bull's tail in the tauroctonies (spike) and the grapes with Bacchus' cult.<sup>96</sup> Traditionally conceived as a Mithraic monument due to the depiction of the bull on what was believed to be the main die of the altar. However, no clear association between Mithras and Bacchus has been found in the rest of the Empire.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>91</sup> LIMC s.v. Dionysus III 1 and 2.

<sup>92</sup> CIMRM 334.

<sup>93</sup> BLÁZQUEZ (n. 10) 101; MUÑOZ GARCÍA VASO (n. 14) 841–842.

<sup>94</sup> BAENA DE ALCAZAR, L.: Una nota sobre el prototipo de la llamada Isis del Museo Nacional de Arte Romano de Mérida. *Anas* (2001) 11–18.

<sup>95</sup> MELIDA: Cultos emeritenses (n. 3) 454.

<sup>96</sup> GARCIA Y BELLIDO: Cuatro esculturas (n. 38) 365.

<sup>97</sup> Bacchus iconography appears in Mitreo delle Caseggiato di Diana (Ostia Antica) and in Stockstadt (CIMRM 1176, 1178, 1179). BELTRÁN FORTES (n. 39) 172 proposes a parallel with the Lago di Burano site, where allegedly Mithraic and bacchic evidence was found together. However, there is no clear explanation of this fact in the publication of this site: COLLINS-CLINTON, J.: *A Late Antique Shrine of Liber Pater at Cosa*. Leiden 1977, 40–41. For another point of view of Mithras/Bacchus relation, see HAYNES, I.: Sharing secrets? The material culture of mystery cults from Londinium, Apulum and beyond. In *Londinium and beyond. Research report*. York 2008, 128–133.



### 3.8.2. *Fragment of Altar from Barbate (Baetica)*

This is conceived of as Mithraic by some authors due to the decorative motifs: a bucranium, a star, a crescent, torches and vegetal ornamentation.<sup>98</sup> However, the same iconography can be found in monuments dedicated to Cybele and Attis<sup>99</sup> or to local pre-Roman divinities.<sup>100</sup> In our opinion, this monument does not constitute a testimony of a Mithraic cult.

### 3.8.3. *Triangular Altar from Calle Espronceda, Mérida (Lusitania)*

Presents a concavity on the top, also triangular. Structure made of clay, plaster and bricks, resembling the shape of a bull: on the NE side a series of grooves evoke the animal's nose and mouth, while at the opposite end two protuberances on the angles resemble the animal's ears. The chronology (late 1st century AD) might imply an earlier beginning of Mithras's cult in the city.

## 3.9. *Other Findings*

### 3.9.1. *Altar Capital from Can de Modolell (Tarraconensis)*

The front of the altar is decorated with two small heads which seem to imitate the shape of the *pulvini*; between them are stylised volutes. On the sides are a solar wheel, the silhouettes of a bull and a lion, according to some authors, and a situla. Due to the poor preservation of the altar, scholars have considered the heads to be Cautes and Cautopates,<sup>101</sup> but they have also been identified as Sol and Luna, although no consensus has been reached. Zoomorphic and vegetal elements on the sides do not display a clear Mithraic motif, but it is possible that these elements would have evoked a series of teachings that neophytes could have acquired during the initiation proces.<sup>102</sup>

### 3.9.2. *Cosmogonic Mosaic from Casa del Mitreo, Mérida (Lusitania)*

This mosaic represents the cosmos through a series of allegoric figures tagged with their names, structuring the composition in three levels: sky (*Oriens*; *Occasus*; *Caelum*;

<sup>98</sup> See bibliography in n. 40.

<sup>99</sup> See monuments found in Isola Sacra and Campo della Magna Mater (Ostia Antica): SQUARCIA-PINO, M. F.: *I culti orientali ad Ostia*. Leiden 1962, 10. Or the monuments found in Castellum Tidditanum, Numidia: BERTHIER, A.: *Tiddis, cite antique de Numidie*. Paris 2000, 430–432.

<sup>100</sup> ALVAR, J.: Los cultos místéricos en la Tarraconense. In MAYER, M. (ed.): *Religio Deorum. Coloquio Internacional de Epigrafía (Culto y Sociedad en Occidente)* 1988. Sabadell 1993, 27–46; CANTO, A. M.: La tierra del toro. Ensayo de identificación de ciudades vasconas. *Archivo Español de Arqueología* 70 (1997) 31–70; GÓMEZ, A.: Así en Oriente como en Occidente: el origen de los altares taurodémicos de la Península Ibérica. *SPAL* 19 (2010) 129–148; MARCO SIMON, F.: ¿Taurobolios vascónicos? la vitalidad pagana en la Tarraconense durante la segunda mitad del s. IV. *Gerión* 15 (1997) 297–320.

<sup>101</sup> We would like to also compare this piece with the monument from Hedderheim (CIMRM 1127) which displays the representations of the four Winds situated at the top of the altar.

<sup>102</sup> GORDON, R. L.: Viewing Mithraic art: the altar from Burginatum (Kalkar), Germania Inferior. *ARYS: Antigüedad, religiones y sociedades* 1 (1998) 227–258.

the Winds; *Saeculum*; etc.), earth (*Natura*; the Seasons; etc.), sea (*Oceanus*; *Tranquilitas*; Rivers; *Pharus*, etc.). However, the central figure around which all the others revolve is missing. Only a fragment of the winged head and the letters AET- remain. Authors considered that the concept of *Aeternitas* might have been represented by a young Aion seated with the zodiac ring. Although several of these motifs are often present in the Mithraic iconography, there is not any specific testimony to associate the mosaic with the cult.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

In the preceding pages we have focused our attention on the study of the different iconographic motifs associated with the Mysteries of Mithras, analysing each monument and drawing parallels to clarify both their function and symbolism, and to finally conclude their ascription to the cult's repertoire. As a compendium of all this, we present below the most significant conclusions of our investigation:

We understand that the standardization of the tauroctony not only as a mere means of promoting the dissemination of the cult, but also as a representation of a ritual that, as such, must always be done in the same way, in order to ensure its efficiency. We can affirm that five tauroctonies have been found so far (three from Italica, the newly interpreted fragments from Mérida and part of Tróia's altar). However, the presence of the bull in a monument does not seem to involve a direct reference to Mithras, as traditionally has been stated. Therefore, the bull itself should not be understood as a symbol of the god.

Although the polychrome was not preserved in most of the materials found in Hispania,<sup>103</sup> we must emphasise that all monuments would have been richly decorated: in Mérida, several of the marbles would have been embellished with the insertion of metallic elements, a technique that would have added the brightness and sparkles of the golden colour.<sup>104</sup> In addition, if we drew a parallel with other examples found in the Empire, it is possible that the lion-headed god might have been covered in red or gold pigments referring to fire, an element that apparently characterised this Mithraic divinity.<sup>105</sup> Thus, colour would have acquired a semantic value, as the visual stimulus would have attained a new meaning in the context of a mystery. In the cult of Mithras, gold and red evoke the god as a solar power, the creator of light.

According to our research, a sculpture of the male figure with a lion should be included in the Mithraic catalogue, as the presence of the feline and the rayed crown (now lost) would have connected him with the sculpture of Aion, who also displays a lion mask on his chest and, of course, with the Lion-headed god. We propose that this figure could represent Sol, the guardian of the grade *Heliodromus*. The particular

<sup>103</sup> Rests of polychrome were found on the dadophor and Mithras' chlamys (San Albín deposit).

<sup>104</sup> The sculpture of Aion could have had bronze wings, while the male with lion could have worn a rayed crown.

<sup>105</sup> Lion-head sculptures with red or gold polychrome: *CIMRM* 227, 312, 314, 503, 550.

canon of the statues found in San Albín (characterised by the lack of volume) seems to indicate that they were destined to be seen frontally, possibly located in niches inside the temple.

As for the male representation with *parazonium*, it could have been part of the Mithraic repertoire as the tutelary deity of the *Miles* grade, Mars, while the figure of Venus could have represented the grade *Nymphus*. On the other hand, we would like to propose that the figure traditionally interpreted as Isis could be, in fact, a representation of Luna, goddess of the grade *Perses*. All of them, together with the monumental representation of Mercury, could have been part of a rich iconographic programme that included the planetary divinities of the Mithraic hierarchy. Representations of Saturn or Jupiter, however, have not yet been found.

The presence of the signature of a foreign artist in one of the sculptures from San Albín might allude not only to the prestige of the artist himself but also to the acquisitive power and the refined taste of the local hierarchy. The traces of fire found in some of the sculptures located in *Augusta Emerita* could be understood as signs of the violent end of Mithraism in the city. If the initiates decided to hide the marbles in fear of reprisals, it would appear that these were never recovered.

The great tauroctony from *Igabrum* (Cabra) and the piece found in Montilla cannot be considered as evidence of the Mithraic cult in Hispania, although they constitute a clear manifestation of the popularity reached by the iconography of these beliefs, traditionally conceived to be reserved to the eyes of the initiated.

Finally, the altar from Tróia, possibly carved in Italy, along with the fragment of Phrygian marble found in Baetica and the sculpture of Asclepius made of Aphrodisian marble, are a clear example of the existing trade channels in the Empire. *Ostia Antica* and *Portus*, the fluvial and maritime ports of Rome, redistributed marbles from the Eastern provinces to the West, possibly through agencies located in the production areas that facilitated the commerce.

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